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AUTHOR Smith, Sally L.
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ABSTRACT

The founder of the Lab School of Washington, a day school of 300 students for youngsters with severe learning disabilities discusses how negative behaviors of children with learning disabilities frequently turn into positive attitudes in adulthood. Examples of successful students are provided and lessons learned from working with such students are discussed, including: (1) parents and teachers should tune into the interests and talents of the child with learning disabilities and foster them in every way possible; (2) they should evaluate the irritating, negative, mischievous, so-called "bad" behaviors of the child with learning disabilities and then use it for positive purposes; (3) parents and teachers need to comment specifically and positively on the behaviors, efforts, actions, and attitudes that meet the norm; (4) personality styles need to be studied and parents and teachers need to look at what is working, what the strengths of a student's personality are and offer some opportunities to try out his or her capabilities; and (5) parents and teachers should not discount the impossible and should realize that some of the irritating negative behaviors have helped youngsters with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders demonstrate astonishing creativity and awesome talent in adult life. (CR)

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# School Failures, Adult Successes: The Negative Behaviors of Children with Severe Learning Disabilities That Often Turn Into Positive Attributes in Adulthood

Sally L. Smith
Founder/Director
The Lab School of Washington
Professor/Head, Graduate Program in Learning Disabilities
American University
Author

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The negative behaviors we often see in the child with severe learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) frequently turn into positive attributes in adulthood. Parents, take note: There is often a light at the end of the tunnel. Teachers, list carefully the irritating negative behaviors in your students and imagine which ones might eventually contribute to adult success. We have seen it happen at The Lab School of Washington over a thirty-two year period.

I founded, designed and still direct The Lab School of Washington, a day school for 300 students (Kindergarten through 12th Grade) in Washington, D.C., for youngsters with severe learning disabilities, most of whom also have ADHD. Eighty-seven percent of the students are placed at The Lab School by local districts in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. The population is intelligent, frequently above average and even gifted, who lag well behind their peers in reading, spelling, writing, and especially in organizing their work. Many are even worse in mathematics or, conversely, students who are on a pre-primer reading level may be taking Algebra II. The cause is neurophysiological. Parents and teachers can help make it better or worse, but can't cause it. There is a faulty wiring of the brain. The latest brain research in America uses the new MRI technology to demonstrate that there is a different architecture of the brain in people with learning disabilities and ADHD. In typical brains, neurons are contained in certain places; but in the brains of children with learning disabilities, the neurons are scatter-shot all over the place. Researchers explain that these ichtopeas then link up with extraordinarily different parts of the brain, thus producing most exceptional abilities as well as disabilities. Disorder, disorganization and immaturity characterize these children. The challenge for parents and teachers is to help them organize themselves, their focus, and their work, thereby allowing their abilities to shine. All the art forms are central to the educative process at The Lab School where 90 percent of the students go on to colleges and universities.

Many students at The Lab School who have been called stubborn, unyielding, willful, turn these negative traits into the positive attribute of stubbornness in adulthood, which is a fierce determination, a fighting spirit, a perseverance that leads them to achieve what they want to accomplish. Andrew, a former student at The Lab School, commented that he could not get over how most students in college were not used to hard work. "They don't have the discipline, the stick-to-itiveness, that my dyslexic friends and I have. It sounds funny to say, but, in a sense, we were better prepared for college than they were."

What often appears in childhood as a refusal to do things the same way others do is really an inability to perform the same way. The child has to solve problems in his own manner, an original way. Neurosurgeon Dr. Fred J. Epstein, whose parents shivered with the thought, "Whatever will become of Fred?," when he was nine years old and very learning disabled, has had an extraordinary career as a brilliant and innovative neurosurgeon with worldwide recognition of his talents. He has invented his own methods rather than following known sequences of procedures. When receiving an award from The Lab School of Washington as Outstanding Learning Disabled Achiever in 1995, Dr. Fred Epstein said, "No one really knows what is the determination that keeps us going. It is basically a fire inside of us that is sparked by a passion in doing something we really enjoy doing."

Sam was always drawing. Teachers criticized him frequently for not paying attention and for not speaking up.

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His parents wished he would get serious about his work. They did not realize that he was, in fact, serious about anything visual. Only his science teacher regularly had him illustrate every definition, and in response his recall was excellent. It took Sam over fourteen years to go from kindergarten to graduate from high school, seven years to graduate from university but he was able to go on to graduate school in architecture and is a successful practicing architect today.

Visual thinkers tend to doodle, draw, color their way through school to the condemnation of their teachers. They tend to think in terms of lines and shapes, not in words. Six time Academy Award winner for documentary films, Charles Guggenheim, was even sent away from home as a young boy until he learned to read.

Mel used to tap his foot or fingers to the rhythms going on in his head. His body was moving all the time, his ADHD was demonstrated by his general restlessness, his impulsivity and attention span problems. He learned his phone number through making it into a drumbeat rhythm. He made his multiplication facts into a musical exercise. He enjoyed syllabication because it involved breaking down sounds.. Mel failed a number of courses. The people who taught him tried to teach him their way and failed. His tutor, Peter, used his musical abilities and "rap" to teach him academics; Mel graduated, went on to college, now makes musical instruments and plays in a band.

Annie lived to dance to the exclusion of everything else. She studied ballet, tap dance, modem dance. She learned geography by putting her map on the floor and moving from state to state, country to country. She learned geometric shapes with elastic that she pulled into different shapes as she extended or contracted her body. Today she teaches dance and has her own studio.

Kenneth learned almost everything through interactions with people, and also with plants. He volunteered in a nursing home and in a commercial greenhouse. He charmed nearly every soul he met. He kept his teachers working with him because he tried so hard and was genuinely sweet. His peers criticized him constantly for being "Mr. Good Guy" and "Kissing Up" all the time. With great difficulty (and with the help of all his adult advocates) he graduated from high school but he could not do college work. Kenneth was very good with plants. So he printed up flyers saying "Come to Kenneth with your plant problems." He passed these flyers out in front of a supermarket. Today he has a four million dollar business with a secretary who does his spelling, an accountant who does the math, and a part-time lawyer who writes all his contracts.

Abdul was a student in his own world whose teachers begged him to "Pay Attention." His negativism and rudeness was demonstrated by his long silences, his constant yawning and passive aggression. The only time he came alive was when discussions involved selling things. He had the ideas and tried them out. Refreshment stands, school store, grocery clerk, anything involving selling turned him on. Now, with a 4.0 average, he just graduated from college with a degree in Marketing.

Esmeralda was a loner. In some ways she seemed more mature than other children her age, yet she was a slow reader, poor at spelling and not at grade level math. Esmeralda loved poetry. She was very spiritual and could be taught through her love of colors. She wrote poetry on her computer and printed it in various shades of blue, then in various shades of green and red. The colors so turned her on, she wanted to write more and become a professional poet.

Fanny Flagg, is the author of books and film scripts: "Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe" and "Daisy Faye and the Miracle Man." She explained that her learning disability first revealed itself in a tap dancing class where she experienced trouble counting out the steps. She couldn't follow the beat or remember the routines. Then at school she had trouble sounding out letters and remembering sequences of instructions. At the same time her great passion and ability for storytelling surfaced. Editors took care of her poor spelling and- a famous writer she became!

A number of students with dyslexia cannot write legibly and may not be able to spell beyond a third or fourth grade level, but they may be able to dictate stories of great imagination or do reporting of quality. Think of the playwright Robert Benton, Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning playwright Wendy Wasserstein, outstanding syndicated columnist for The Washington Post, Richard Cohen, or incredible broadcast journalist Fred Friendly, none of whom can spell and write legibly. Children with severe writing difficulties can become writers - outstanding ones at that!

One of the worst hazards of learning disabilities is how rotten these children tend to feel about themselves. They are smart enough to see how others achieve easily at school but how elusive success is for them. The biggest battle is for their self- esteem. In some high achieving families, a child with learning disabilities has gained great esteem in the family for his prowess in chess. He can win most of the time playing against his higher achieving brothers. In other families, the child with learning disabilities is the family computer expert, or the family finder of lost things, or the one with the best sense of direction. It helps when they are given a label as the family's "best" in a certain area.

Lesson #1: What turns the child on? What are his or her keen interests and pockets of talents? If there is one message that I have for parents and teachers it is to tune into the interests and talents of the child with learning disabilities and foster them in every way possible. Adults with learning disabilities say it is vital for such children to have an expertise in the family that nobody else has, that he or she can demonstrate and teach to others in the family, the school lesson and the community. This expertise does not make up for the academic failure they experience but it does help build some necessary self-esteem!

Alternative learners need to be given more respect because, frequently, they learn by using different intelligences, than the rest of us. As Harvard psychologist and educator Dr. Howard Gardner says, most schools rely on linguistic intelligence, the world of words, or mathematical logical intelligence, the world of numbers and logic. Alternative learners frequently use their visual intelligence (as artists, film makers, architects do) or musical intelligence (as musicians do), kinesthetic intelligence (as dancers and athletes do). Gardner describes those who have interpersonal intelligence (as many great leaders and entrepreneurs do) and those who have intrapersonal intelligences (as many healers, psychologists and social workers do). Some learn through nature (as environmentalists, zoo keepers, and explorers do). And surely there are even more intelligences than Gardner names that provide pathways to learning for some people. Parents and teachers need to look for these routes and bring them into the schools.

One of the complaints teachers voice about their students with learning disabilities is how rigid they often are, that they are so literal that they can only see "one way" to do things. People remark on the intensity that they project. As adults these attributes often turn into commitment, dedication, intensity of purpose, single-mindedness, myopic, narrow minded highly focused thinking, which are particularly positive for the student that becomes a medical or scientific researcher.

Some of the learning disabled who are also hyperactive demonstrate a relentless energy and high activity that disrupt families and classrooms. In some adults this high energy turns into great productivity. Martina has two full-time jobs that she does well. Paul has offices in London, Zurich and Washington, where he expertly manages money.

Dr. Donald Coffey, a Distinguished Professor of Urology, Professor of Oncology and Professor of Pharmacology and Molecular Science at Johns Hopkins University Medical School in Baltimore, Maryland, told students at The Lab School, "I have a terrible time, as you might guess because you cannot become a professor in three different fields if you've only read three books in your life, and that's been my problem. One of the things I have trouble doing is focusing on something. And so my mind sort of jumps around. I cannot pay attention to things, but once I sort of lock in on it, I'm sort of like a bulldog. I just stay right on it until it almost becomes absurd. I'm scatterbrained about things. I get into everything. Yet I am tenacious - the bulldog - once I am involved in something." Coffey was a very difficult student to teach.

There is another clinical condition besides hyperactivity that we often see in the learning disabled, which is called "perseveration." It means beyond perseverance, a mindless repetition of the same thing over and over again. It's a drivenness emanating from an organic condition. It means persisting beyond the reasonable point where most people will stop in the dogged pursuit of a single goal. As one adult in our Night School said, "When I am involved in something, nothing else matters. I will proceed there at all costs, not looking around me at anything else. It's like something inside me is driving me."

Since his Kindergarten years Roland was known for his original ideas. His classmates loved his imagination and turned to him for solutions. They used to say, "Roland will come up with a good idea." His teachers were frustrated because he never followed through on what he said. Never mind, Roland became the highly paid idea man for a well known toy company. Fred, with a similar profile at school, became known as the "creative think" person at an advertising agency.

Many children who are behavior problems would rather appear naughty than stupid. Some just want to have their way no matter what. Mischief makers, kids who get into trouble on purpose, also can show a certain resourcefulness and excellent problem solving ability. Mark made himself so useful to other children that they let him do whatever he wanted. Some people would call his behavior manipulative. It's not too surprising that Mark started out as a salesman in a very competitive business and now is a manager, beating out the competition.

Many talented entrepreneurs who suffered with moderate to severe learning disabilities exhibited manipulative behavior as children. They pulled all kinds of tricks to do what they wanted to do, even if they were forbidden to do it. There is Rick, who sold his mother's jewelry for 25 cents for each trinket (she must have been thrilled!) and

sold lost pencils back to his fellow students. He was kicked out of various schools. Not one teacher looked at his sales ability and found a way to build on it; the schools not only disapproved of his manipulative behavior, they labeled him "bad." He succeeded in turning his teachers' attention toward his behavior and away from his inability to learn at school. It was not until he was 18 years old, that he was tested and his severe learning disabilities were discovered. Today he is a highly successful real estate mogul. He, as many other entrepreneurs, organized his work environment around what he could do, and employed others to do what he couldn't do, such as write letters.

Inventor Thomas Edison was in constant trouble at school and Mrs. Edison was called to school frequently. He wrote in his autobiography, "I was always at the foot of my class. I used to feel that the teachers did not sympathize with me and that my father thought I was stupid." He irritated and baffled his teachers because he didn't follow the rules. He said, "It was impossible to learn the processes of nature by description or the English alphabet and arithmetic by rote ... It was always necessary to observe with my own eyes and to do things or to make things." He went on to invent the light bulb and much more.

Frank was always good in math but had a difficult time expressing himself in words. He was always making deals with his friends and collecting money from them. He was sent to the Principal's Office for setting up a betting pool at age nine in school. Is it any wonder that today he's an investment broker? Tony talked about money all through his childhood. Tony liked to touch it, play with it (lining up his coins into neat little rows on his desk). Tony works in a bank today.

Dan argued so much with his friends, his family and his teachers that he was called "a jailhouse lawyer." He argued with his school principal that if kids didn't sit in rows facing a teacher at a lectern, then the environment could not be called a school. In fact, he argued, The Lab School, with all its art forms and experiential activities, was only a summer I camp held in winter! Today, Dan is a lawyer, Public Defender in Florida.

Egocentricity is seen a great deal among the learning disabled. For many, it is a reflection of the immaturity of the central nervous system and late developing emotional maturity. Parents and teachers frequently complain because these youngsters are so self-absorbed. Said one parent, "It's himself, me, me, me that he thinks about and rarely does he put himself in another person's shoes. In fact, I wonder if he can do that." Yet, sometimes we see that egocentricity translates into creative, highly successful activity - the artist, the inventor, the novel thinker, the well known philosopher, the popular critic, even though they may not be the most thoughtful people, easy partners to live with, or the best of neighbors.

Teachers and parents frequently are annoyed with the child whose hands and pockets are full of little objects that can distract them and their classmates from the work to be done.

Harry was a tinkerer as a child. He couldn't keep his hands off interesting objects. He took apart radios and computers (and couldn't always get them back together) but it's not surprising he became an excellent engineer. It seemed as though Brian thought up ways to annoy his teachers. Brian always had, something in his hands, whether it was paper clips, sticks, rubber bands -- but whatever it was, Brian made it into an interesting construction. Today he has his own successful carpentry business and is busy building the interiors of restaurants and billiard parlors, and making furniture. Janice is employed as a jewelry maker today and is paid to create interesting patterns with found objects (doing just what she did in school) which she was reprimanded for, constantly.

Rob was constantly defining rules and regulations; he nitpicked about every little infraction of the rules. He became very irritated if a peer broke any rules and if a teacher did not pick up on it and take action. Very responsible as a tiny child, he wanted everyone else to be equally responsible in a very orderly world. Today he's a policeman who has received many commendations from his commanding officers for his bravery and efficiency.

Lesson #2. Look at the irritating, negative, mischievous, so-called "bad" behavior of the child with learning disabilities. Does it exhibit a lot of creative problem solving? Then let's use it for positive purposes. Does it show sales ability? Then set up a store, an enterprise of some kind, where this child can shine at home and at school. Does this child's different behavior demonstrate leadership? Do others naturally follow him or her? Remember, many successful adults were what we call "terrible" children.

The child who demonstrates irritating, negative behavior becomes flooded with criticisms, admonitions and punishments. Eighty-five adult students attend The Lab School of Washington's Night School for students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD. They want to improve their skills on the job, go to college, or go on to graduate school. When asked what they remember most from their childhoods, they tend to say "feeling stupid, depressed, not good enough." Angelo, a computer specialist, said, "It didn't help that my parents, neighbors, teachers, coaches, all preached to me to sit still, follow directions properly and speak clearly. There was rarely

anything I seemed to do right."

This is why, at The Lab School, we train ourselves to comment on specific behaviors, efforts, attitudes, actions that are positive. "I like the way you are sitting still," "I like having your eyes looking at me," "Good for you for trying to pronounce that difficult new word," and "Thank you for helping your neighbor." It is vital that their energies to meet goals are rewarded by specific praise, not only to help the students feel better about themselves but, also, for them to follow the model and help others feel positive about themselves.

Lesson #3. Parents and teachers need to comment specifically and positively on the behaviors, efforts, actions and attitudes that meet the norm. In this way the child learns what he does that pleases others and repeats it. We tend not to mention these behaviors for they are taken for granted - but not for this population.

Often personality styles clash with teachers or with the culture of the school. The brash young woman with learning disabilities who is too direct, literal and concrete, is seen as defiant and flouting authority. Pauline just felt unsafe when the classroom structure and rules were not clear. She so craved order that she sounded as though she was dictating to teachers what they should do. Today she is a successful lieutenant in the Army where she receives the structure she requires and there is an answer for her every question.

Eleanor was explosive in school. She felt passionately about everything. As she matured, her passions became art, artifacts, collecting treasures and categorizing them. Today, she works in a museum most effectively, and shares her knowledge with assistants and interns who work for her.

Christopher's style at school was to be as invisible as possible. Rarely did he speak. He loved the outdoors and natural beauty. Teachers struggled to get Christopher involved in learning. Today he is a floral designer who has won prizes for his artistry.

Teddy, referred to as "the terrible Teddy," could not work in a group, even a group of two. Today he is an excellent photographer who works on his own.

Some adults with learning disabilities are not successful working for anyone. They feel comfortable only when working for themselves with minimum or no staff; others want a big staff. There are those who are not comfortable with hierarchies, but feel satisfied working as a vital member of a team or in a partnership. We can see some of these patterns developing in play groups and in athletic teams at school. We need to spend more time in schools looking for what comes naturally to children, and in what environments and situations they are comfortable, instead of concentrating so much on the negative behaviors.

In thirty-two years at The Lab School we have seen some of our graduates as being wholly self absorbed while others were sensitive to the needs of others. The latter were the good listeners in childhood. Their peers tended to trust them. They were mostly non-judgmental. Today they tend to work in the helping professions -- social service, hospitals, schools, day care centers. Frequently having been teased, humiliated, ridiculed in their childhoods, they seem to understand personal pain in depth and want to help others.

Gregory, Ned and Minna were particularly effective child-care workers because they knew every trick that the children could pull on them -- they had done it all! They cared deeply for kids, had a sense of mission to help children as others had helped them. Ned and Minna were nurturers, starting early in school with their friends, they made those around them feel good about themselves. Gregory, who was continually punished at school for not doing as he was told, was tough and aggressive. His teachers had been afraid he would lead the children out of the classroom in a protest or strike and they would follow him. In adulthood his leadership was highly recognized and he became a very effective tough head of the Teacher's Union!

Many Lab School graduates come into adulthood with more self knowledge than their peers. They anticipate people's needs and reactions. Often, they are more aware of their strengths and interests because the adults around them tried to help them build self esteem. They seem more prepared for bumps and bruises than their peers.

A number of students, severely learning disabled, tended to be friendless and isolated from groups. They caused their parents enormous concern because they were alone so much of the time. A good number of these students have ended up working with the homeless, the elderly or the ill -- with populations desperately needing assistance. A way to help students feel significant is to have them help others. Mother Teresa once said, "We will never know until we get to heaven how much we owe the poor for allowing us to serve them." The truth she

spoke lies in the basic need of human beings to do something useful and helpful for others if one is to be truly fulfilled and happy. As the students with severe learning disabilities acquired the skills of helping they tended to discover more of their own resources, and felt more related to the world because others needed them. They were empowered by giving.

One of the most challenging behaviors to teachers as well as to parents is shown by the child with learning disabilities who will not dare to risk being wrong. Often these students are described as perfectionists, who must have all their answers right or not even try. They are youngsters with learning disabilities who tasted failure and defeat early in life and won't risk more of that sour, bitter taste again. They must be cajoled, excited, inspired, lured into learning, making it as non-threatening as possible. It is interesting to see that a number of these youngsters are employed today in jobs that are very clearly defined and highly structured, such as traffic controllers, accountants, and in medical technologies such as radiology. They know precisely what is expected of them and their performance ratings tend to be very high.

With behavior just the opposite of the non- risk taker, children who were very impulsive and acted before they thought sometimes become successful adults because they are not afraid to take risks. Mario went into Venture Capital work. Philip invested in a company that took off. Zeb joined a firm that was going bankrupt and helped to turn it around. Of course, there are stories of impulsive behavior that led to disasters on the job too. And then there are our prisons ... that is the fear of every parent who has a child with poor impulse control, weak self esteem and poor judgement. Our Lab School experience is that the interventions of special schooling (particularly effective special education), good counseling, speech and language therapy, even occupational therapy, strong support from family or other adults who stay in their lives, do help prevent students with poor impulse control from getting into trouble with the law.

Gerry, whose need for attention was insatiable, ate up his teachers until they felt there was little left in them. (Inexperienced teachers give and give until they are drained completely.) Veteran teachers gave Gerry what they could plus a little bit more, but did not let him dry them out. Today, he is a dynamic tour guide who has audience after audience paying attention to him and loving what he does.

Sometimes a child's innate intelligence and good problem solving abilities lead them to develop systems to help them organize their lives. Esther was so disorganized she couldn't find her notebook, her homework, her hair clip, her umbrella, her gym clothes. Her parents were exhausted by the time she went to school each day because she had no sense of time and timing. Her mother referred to her as an "unmade bed" or "a walking mess." Her teachers blamed the parents for neglecting her. She spilled her food at lunch and bumped into her classmates, causing them to drop things. A victim of the hidden dimensions of leaning disabilities -- time and space, Esther was all over the place, in everybody's territory, not exactly endearing herself to anybody. Ferociously ambitious in a family of high achievers, Esther recognized her own difficulties, used technology, paid for assistance, persuaded others to help, developed systems for remembering things and got through high school, college, graduate school and achieved a Ph.D. in public health.

Lesson #4. Personality styles need to be studied. Parents and teachers need to look at what is working, what the strengths of a student's personality are and offer some opportunities to try out his or her capabilities.

Over a thirty-two year period, I have seen amazing transformations in lives. Never write a child off. Dennis, who could not stay in his seat, concentrate on anything for more than a minute, and didn't learn to read until he was close to fourteen years of age, just earned his Master's Degree in Communications: Film Studies, at a reputable university and is a successful film maker. Horace, who barely uttered a word up through high school because of his severe speech/language difficulties and learning disabilities, graduated from college at age 23 and is going on to graduate study in Criminal Studies and the Justice System. Alexa, who took eight years to get through college, is a successful dress designer. Martin, who was expelled by six schools for unruly behavior, is today an effective athletics coach and personal fitness trainer.

Don't give up hope. There is an outstanding resilience in many unlikely students and there are numbers of good people who help them through their difficult journeys to adulthood.

Lesson #5. Don't discount the impossible. Some of the very irritating negative behaviors, that have worn out parents and teachers and lead to school failure, have helped youngsters with learning disabilities and ADHD demonstrate astonishing creativity and awesome talent in adult life.

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